DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 556 SO 023 493

AUTHOR Kissen, Rita M.
TITLE Voices from the Glass Closet: Lesbian and Gay Teachers Talk about Their Lives.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Atlanta, GA, April 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Homophobia; *Homosexuality; Secondary School Teachers; *Self Concept; *Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Education; *Teachers; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Conditions
IDENTIFIERS *Homosexual Teachers

ABSTRACT

This study explores issues of importance to gay and lesbian teachers. It seeks to answer questions and to dramatize the damaging effects of homophobia on the lives of gay teachers, as well as all teachers and students. The project was narrative and qualitative, consisting of informal and open ended interviews of 10 self-identifies gay or lesbian teachers or counselors in grades pre K-12. In spite of the variety of questions and answers in the 10 interviews, 3 recurring themes emerged. The first involved the teachers' self-definition as lesbians or gay men, their self-concept as teachers, and the intersection of those two identities. The second major focus was the damaging effect of homophobia on their daily lives in and out of the classroom. The final theme was the need to develop strategies to avoid being fired and to nurture themselves in the face of tremendous pressure and stress. A few teachers actually felt that their position had been strengthened by partial or complete disclosure. Most subjects interviewed remembered wanting to be teachers from an early age. Only 2 of the 10 interviewed identified as gay before becoming teachers. Almost all of the subjects reported physical and emotional symptoms that they attributed to the strains of their lives as gay teachers. They regretted their inability to reach out to lesbian and gay students, but they are beginning to see that risk taking, disclosure and standing up for others are essential to their own self-worth. (DK)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 363 556

VOICES FROM THE GLASS CLOSET:

LESBIAN AND GAY TEACHERS TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

KIM M. KISSEN

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 023 493

Rita M. Kissen
College of Education
University of Southern Maine
Gorham, Maine 04038

VOICES FROM THE GLASS CLOSET: LESBIAN AND GAY TEACHERS TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

INTRODUCTION

This project began with my experience as the mother of a lesbian daughter who is now completing her graduate training in teacher education. Watching a beloved family member negotiate the intricate maze of coming out, dealing with societal homophobia, and establishing an authentic identity as a teacher while protecting her own safety, is probably the closest a heterosexual educator can come to living in the glass closet.

In 1991, after becoming active in Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG), and working with sexual minority youth in Michigan and Maine, I questioned 44 lesbian and gay young adults about their lives as teenagers in high school. Responses varied, but one theme emerged repeatedly: the longing of gay-identified adolescents for adult role models who could help make schools safer for them. While the more sophisticated understood why most gay teachers did not feel free to come out, all wished that some teacher, somewhere in their high school years, had made a supportive gesture, even if only to mention a book like <u>One Teenager in Ten</u>, or to counter homophobic remarks from other students and teachers.

Finally, several incidents in my recent professional life have involved me in the lives of gay teachers. As a university supervisor of graduate interns, I work with secondary teachers in two local high schools. Most are people I know only through our limited relationship as supervisor and cooperating teacher; yet over the past two years, a steady progression of them have come out to me. Sometimes the disclosure took place in their classrooms, momentarily emptied of students. Sometimes it was at a conference, or a

diversity workshop. Although my public involvement in P-FLAG and in local gay politics had identified me as an ally, the teachers and I were fully conscious that they were taking a tremendous risk by revealing their sexual orientation within a professional setting. They were driven by a powerful desire for self-disclosure, which both they and I identified as a desire for authenticity.

The realization that even the most closeted gay teachers want and need to be out led me to ask how they manage to present themselves authentically when they cannot fully "come out" in the usual sense. This study seeks to answer some of these questions, and to dramatize the damaging effects of homophobia on the lives of gay teachers, and, in fact, of all teachers and students.

THE PROCESS

The present paper is my first attempt to define some of the issues in what I envision as a full-length study involving subjects from a wide variety of geographic, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is based on open-ended interviews with ten people, all of whom self-identified as gay or lesbian (none as bisexual), and all of whom have worked as teachers or counselors in grades pre K-12. We met through through personal contacts and through advertisements I placed in several lesbian and gay newspapers. Eight were women and two were men. All were white; one described her family of origin as poor, while the rest came from working class or middle class families. Eight currently teach in Maine, one in Louisiana and one in Ohio. Four were in their 40's, four in their 30's, and two were 50 or older. Eight have been or are currently classroom teachers, one is a counselor, and one is a special education consultant who visits clients' homes. Four had taught in public high schools (grades 9-12), two in junior high schools (grades 7-8), two at the elementary level (K-3), and one in a private day school (K-12).

Because this project is narrative and qualitative, the interviews were informal and open ended. Each lasted about an hour, but in some cases the exchange went on long after

we ned off the tape recorder. Although each teacher was invited to define the question "What is life like for you as a lesbian or gay educator?" according to his or her particular experience, I included several specific questions each time. They were:

- How did you decide to become a teacher?
- When did you first identify as lesbian or gay?
- What survival strategies have you developed in your life as a gay or lesbian teacher?
- Do you think life in schools is getting better or worse for gay teachers? Do you think it will be safe to be out as a gay teacher within your lifetime?
- If homophobia magically disappeared tomorrow, how would your life as a teacher be affected?

Beyond these basic questions, discussions ranged widely. Some teachers gave powerful portraits of their lives as gay educators; some talked about their support networks, which included biological families, families of choice, religious communities and gay and lesbian networks. Much of the discussion was about fears--the ultimate fear of being fired and losing the opportunity to teach, along with peripheral fears of harassment, isolation, and social condemnation.

In spite of the great variety of questions and answers in these ten interviews, three recurring themes emerged. The first involved the teachers' self-definition as lesbians or gay men, their self-concept as teachers, and the intersection of those two identities. The second major focus was the damaging effect of homophobia on their daily lives in and out of the classroom. A final theme was the need to develop strategies to avoid being fired and to nurture themselves in the face of tremendous pressure and stress. A few teachers actually felt that their position had been strengthened by partial or complete disclosure. Though they described self-revelation as dangerous and scary, the few who had taken these risks said that the rewards of self-actualization far outweighed the stresses. Stated more simply, the costs of hiding were greater than the costs of disclosure.

What follows is an exploration of these three themes as they emerged in conversations with ten lesbian and gay educators during the summer of 1992 and the winter of 1993.

A NOTE ON IDENTIFICATION

Because the issue of disclosure is so crucial in the lives of lesbian and gay teachers, the question of anonymity was especially significant. In the interests of empowering my subjects, I invited them to choose their own pseudonyms, both for themselves and for their schools. Some wanted to be known by fictitious names; some chose to use their own first names; and two decided to use their actual first and last names. For all my subjects, participating in the interview was itself a step toward disclosure, and we tried to work as partners in a process rather than as (active) "researcher" and (passive) "subject."

IDENTIFYING AS A TEACHER: "THE CENTER OF MYSELF"

Most of the teachers I interviewed remembered wanting to be teachers at an early age. Rose, an elementary guidance counselor in her late 40's, decided to be a teacher in grade school; Dianne, a junior high school teacher, remembered playing "school" with her sister when they were both very young. Peggy, now on leave from her position as a high school English teacher, was drawn to teaching by her love of literature and as a spiritual life choice.

> If you ask me why I think I'm a teacher I think it has to do with love of words and love of learning. . . . I always saw teaching as an extension of other things that are really at the center of myself. (Peggy)

Three of my subjects said they were attracted to teaching as a result of adolescent crushes on their own teachers; interestingly, only one of those was a same-sex crush.

> In 7th and 8th grade I fell in love with my French teacher! . . . I remember the crushing blow when I found out she was married . . . I thought, Oh my God, she's married. How could she do that? So I became a French teacher. (Jean)

Those who entered teaching later in life may have started out in other careers, but once in the classroom they too felt a definite calling.

> When I got my degree in teaching, I didn't want to be a teacher at all. It was a good thing for a girl to do. . . . [Now] I really like it. . . . It's fun working with kids. I get to play all day! ((Linda)

> I got a job after I graduated working at an Outdoor Ed. center washing dishes. . . . They ended up being short staffed so they asked me to fill in for one of the naturalists. I loved it as soon as I started teaching. I thought, there is nothing else that I want to do. (Lydia)

Like their self identification as teachers, my ten subjects' self-definition as lesbians or gay men happened at various times in their lives, from their early teens to their mid 30's. Originally, I had hoped to study the process by which a self consciously gay or lesbian person would make the decision to be a teacher, but this investigation will have to wait for more interviews, since only two of the subjects in this small study, Lydia and Alan, identified as gay before becoming teachers. For the others, who were working in schools when they came out, the problem was not whether to be a teacher, but how to reconcile their new sexual identity with a professional situation which had always felt perfectly safe and no longer was. In some cases, the only solution was to leave teaching temporarily; for those who stayed, coming out process on an added strain.

> I did what I thought I was supposed to do. I got married and had three kids. . . . So actually I never taught as a gay, consciously open gay person. I taught for 14 years and then I left teaching. It all kind of went crazy when I turned 40, got divorced, left teaching after 14 years, came out. . . . I came back to teaching just 5 years ago. This is the first time that I've been in a teaching environment where it's been relevant. (Mike)

> I didn't figure out I was a lesbian until I was 29. . . . All the years that I taught in Tennessee I didn't have to deal with homophobia. . . . Then I moved to Maine and started teaching and that's when things started to come together and that's where I started having problems. It was awful, it was terrible. Because I was having a hard time thinking I was a lesbian along with having, never overt but covert attacks from kids like notes left on the bathroom walls and stuff like that. (Dianne)

"I'M SURPRISED I DIDN'T GET AN ULCER"

Almost all my subjects reported physical and emotional symptoms that they attributed to the strains of their lives as gay teachers.

> Among other things, I weigh 40 pounds more than I did when I got involved with this person. I don't drink, I don't do lots of other damaging things to myself, but obviously food has become a problem to me. Part of the reason I went into therapy was that I had this sense that I'd weigh 350 pounds if I didn't. (Peggy)

> I got a bleeding ulcer last fall, I thought, this is crazy. I nearly quit my job because I thought, it isn't worth dying over, this is not worth ruining my health. (Karen)

> I was probably closer to suicide than any other time in my life. I just didn't see any hope. I didn't see the reason for living if I couldn't do work that mattered to me. I didn't see anything else that mattered the way that teaching mattered. (Lydia)

> I'm surprised I didn't get an ulcer . . . getting into the car at 3:00 on Friday when school was out and driving 5 hours to Denver . . . to find any kind of gay community support. . . . To the gay bookstore, to the bar, to the gay disco and then on Sunday you drove back knowing that on Monday it would start all over. (Rebecca)

> On some days I just shut my door and cried and got myself back together because it was so painful. (Rose)

One way of measuring the extent to which homophobia harms these gay teachers is to consider their responses to the question, "What would your life be like if homophobia ended tomorrow?" For most of my subjects, the exhausting routines of self-protection had become so internalized that they could hardly imagine life in a world where they were free to be themselves.

> I could talk about my life totally openly like everybody else does. . . . When we are sitting around in the faculty lounge and John X says, "Well Judy and I went to this movie over the weekend," then I could say, "Oh, Jack and I saw that too." I can't imagine that." (Mike)

> That is so totally unimaginable that I need a couple of minutes. Yes, it would be a lot different. . . . Margie and I are partners and I would like to be treated as a couple. (Jean)

> I could take all of me to school. . . . I could really put Sandy's picture on my desk. (Rose)

Teaching in a safer environment would also permit more authentic relationships with students.

> I would like to feel safe enough to have the kids know from me that yes I'm a lesbian. . . . I want to be seen as Dianne Jones, language arts teacher, not Dianne Jones, queer language arts teacher. (Dianne)

> It would be tremendously beneficial to students, all students, all kids, if they saw gay/lesbian people as just another variation of the range of people. It would change all of their lives and I can't think that it could be anything but healthy. . . . And that would be worth so much that I can hardly even imagine it. (Mike)

Teachers especially regretted their inability to reach out to lesbian and gay students. They felt sad and guilty about having to lie to the youth who needed them most.

> A boy who I never had in class . . . came bopping into my room between classes, came over to my desk. The class was empty and the kids were getting ready to come in and he says, "Miss Smith, are you gay?" Very blunt question. I looked at him and my heart sank and I had a million and two thoughts going around in my mind: "Am I honest with this kid? I don't know this kid. Is he trying to out me? Could I lose my job? What's going to happen if I tell him the truth? What do I do? Is he gay? Is he asking me for support? Does he need help?" All these questions went through my head, the kids started go come back into the classroom, and I said, "No." That was a dishonest answer to him from myself. . . Maybe he needed my help. He's not back at the school this year, I don't know what happened to him. But that haunts me to this day. (Dianne)

"I HAVE NO CHOICE BUT NOT TO RENEW YOUR CONTRACT"

Sooner or later, conversations with gay teachers lead to one overwhelming concern: the fear of being fired. Along with this fear, teachers worry about harassment, isolation, and condemnation by those around them if their sexual identity were made known. It is not surprising then, that a good deal of our interview time was devoted to a discussion of worst-case "nightmare" scenarios.

Most of the scenarios were remarkably similar. Teachers guessed that the pressure to fire them would be more likely to come from parents than from students or the administration.

> Parents are very picky in this community. . . . the kids, as vicious and cruel as they can be, they can roll with the punches pretty much. (Rebecca)

> Kids don't care about anyone else. They are so totally narcissistic that they really don't care about anyone's life but their own. [I worry about] some . . . group of fundamentalist parents. (Jean)

In such cases, teachers feared that even principals and school boards who were not themselves troubled by homosexuality might succumb to parental pressure.

> If I were ever to be fired I imagine it to be happening because the school board comes under political pressure, and I don't think the school board has very much spine. (Peggy)

> I can hear him saying to me, "You know that we value your teaching tremendously. I think you've made a great contribution to the school. I would like to see you stay here. I think the world stinks, and I think people are awful, but for the good of the school I have no choice but to not renew your contract." (Mike)

For two of the teachers I interviewed, Karen and Lydia, this worst nightmare had actually come true. Their stories are chilling illustrations of homophobia graphically played out in its most extreme form, but they are also testaments to the power of resistance.

KAREN: "THE WOMAN WHO HATES BOYS"

Karen teaches 7th and 8th grade at a rural elementary school in Maine. Her troubles began when she gave low grades to some eighth grade basketball players.

> It had never happened in the history of the school. . . . There was a big outcry. There were three kids who were disqualified from playing. . . . Two of the parents were very upset and decided I hated boys and that was why their sons were gotten off the ball team.

After two boys' parents filed a complaint against her, the principal informed Karen that the parents were holding a secret meeting with the superintendent.

> He said, "It seems to do with the fact that some people think you're a lesbian." I said, "I didn't see a 'No Dykes' sign when I came across the bridge in Lakeville." And he said, "Well, don't worry about it, it is going to be okay." Well, I decided it probably wasn't going to be okay. (Karen)

Karen turned to two allies, an art teacher in her building, and a parent who offered to gather support.

> [The parent] went home and called some people, some other people made calls, the ripple effect. When these four people and their children showed up that afternoon to complain to the superintendent, there were 19 parents and their children in to to say, "Over our dead bodies you get rid of this woman." It was really wonderful, it really was. Here were these people just being real shits--and all this outpouring of "we know a good teacher when we see it."

Later that week, Karen received additional supportive phone calls, including one that she related with some irony.

> One of the people who had lived there 20 years called me up. Funny thing is, she is terribly homophobic. Because she didn't believe what she had heard--she only knew I was a good teacher--she said, "Karen, I just wanted to let you know that they called us Communists 20 years ago when we moved here. They don't have a clue what 'Communist' means and they still call us Communists. So don't worry about what they call you." Of course she really didn't know I was a lesbian, but that's besides the fact.

Karen's story shows that direct action can force attackers to back down, and that a good network of allies can create a "ripple effect," as she put it.

> So whatever they had set out to accomplish had backfired totally, the trouble-making group was absolutely mortified that anyone had found out. Here they were publicly causing trouble and they are the kind that likes to sneak around in the shadows. (Karen)

Life seemed more secure until another incident later that spring put Karen in jeopardy once more Several fifth grade girls confided to her that their teacher had a habit of "running his hands down a little girl's blouse." When her report to the principal brought no results, Karen threatened to call the state Child Protection Services.

> This teacher was accused by me, the woman who hates men. The woman who wanted to get rid of all the men in the building, the woman who hates boys and is now the woman who hates men. . . . When I told [the principal that I was going to report to the Department of Human Services, he said, "Do you want to keep your job? Are you planning on staying here?" I

said, "Are you threatening me?" And he said, "Oh, no, I thought you were saying you were getting another job."

Despite her vulnerability, Karen continued her efforts to bring the accused molester to justice and refused to leave her job.

These people aren't used to people who pull them out into the light when they are dishonest.

Karen's recurring imagery of bringing her enemies out into the light is a fit metaphor for her own refusal to disappear and an interesting reminder that in her case, it was her attackers who were in the closet. By the time I interviewed her, a new principal had taken over, more evidence had surfaced against the alleged molester, and Karen had managed to get tenure, "much to everyone's surprise, I suspect." Despite the cost to her emotional and physical health, she took the long view.

For no good reason people maliciously attacked me. I don't understand. But I won! Maybe justice does prevail! And we'll get rid of that child molester! He's been stealing out of lobster traps, he may end up dead anyway.

REBECCA: "MISS SMITH - DYKE FROM HELL"

I first met Rebecca at a teachers conference where we both attended a workshop on homophobia. Though neither of us knew it at the time, that conference was the prelude to a life-changing event.

After the workshop, which was on that Friday, I returned to school on Monday and opened my file drawer in my classroom to discover that it was totally overflowing with toilet paper. I thought that was weird. So I dug a little further and underneath the toilet paper was a paper cup. Written in bold black marker [was] "We hate you, Miss Smith, dyke from hell," and on my desk calendar blotter written across the top was DYKE. So that was the way my Monday started after having this very powerful workshop on Friday.

That night, shocked and angry, Rebecca shared the incident with her partner.

I told her I've got to do something,. I said, "It may mean my job, it may mean--I'm not sure what it means." She was very supportive and said, "you've gotta do this."

Armed with the evidence of the calendar and the paper cup, she went to her principal.

> I showed him the cup and he said, "I can't believe this, this upsets me so. I'm so upset." We discussed homosexuality among students, that there are definitely some at our school, and finally narrowing the gap to zero in on me, with him saying, "You know, Rebecca I don't know what your sexual preference is. I think I know, but I don't know for sure. It doesn't matter to me." . . . He's a very serious, somber, large-framed guy who you could have a very weak feeling about, that he could be extremely homophobic. The "good ole New Hampshire boy," born and raised. . . . I said, "If you think I'm a lesbian, you're right." He said, "I knew you were when I hired you."

As a result of this incident, and because of her willingness to speak out to her principal, Rebecca is now leading a diversity team planning a year-long series of workshops for students and teachers at her school.

LYDIA: "THEY SMELL BLOOD, LIKE SHARKS"

Lydia was the only teacher in the group who had actually lost her job because she was a lesbian. She was teaching science at a junior high school in north central Maine when her ordeal began.

> There were a couple of kids who were cheating on a test blatantly. . . . So I told them they would both get zeros and they needed to come in after school and I forget what else. There had also been an incident on the playground . . . where somebody was talking about "one of those fags with a limp wrist," and that he was a real sicko. . . . I said people who are gay are not necessarily sick. I probably didn't say it quite that easily, I probably said it with more tension in my voice. But there was a reaction from the kids that I said that at all. . . . One of the girls went home and in the process of telling her mother that she had flunked the test for me, I think [she] must have softened that blow with telling this story about how I liked queer people so I obviously must be one.

Although the girl's mother complained to the principal, no further action was taken, and the incident seemed closed. At the end of her second year, Lydia received tenure. Meanwhile, the girl in question had gone to live with an aunt and uncle in another town. The following year, Lydia's third, the student returned to the local high school.

> I wrote the kid a note when she came back and gave it to a friend of hers to give it to her. "I heard you were back. It would be great to see you. Drop by the school sometime. Hope you're doing all right." The mother got that note. I don't think the girl ever knew I had written it. But the mother

> decided that . . . I was trying to come on to her daughter. . . . She went straight to the superintendent . . . with this note saying that I was obviously trying to come on to her daughter and that I should be fired for that.

The superintendent responded by accusing Lydia of bad teaching.

> I got a whole bunch of letters fired off to me about how I was never to be with students alone in my classes at any time other than when I was teaching. . . . He was never willing to be specific and put down on paper what it was that I was being accused of. . . . The things he wrote in these letters, which all went straight into my personal file, were things like, "People who work in radical causes are never properly prepared with their classes." It was really off the wall. He had never been in to see my classes. He had never seen my lesson plan book. . . . In fact, as far as he and the principal knew, the only social activism I did was that I volunteered with the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts.

As pressure mounted over the summer, Lydia waited to find out if the school board would remove her from her job. Her union representative, purportedly her ally, proved part of the problem.

> The feeling of the people in the union both at the local level and . . . within the state was, "Oh well, you got caught. You are not supposed to be friends with kids.." . . . He started telling me about this gay male teacher who he knew, who, whenever gossip started going in the community, he made sure he was seen with some woman who was a real good looker.

Isolated and demoralized, Lydia gave in.

> I felt like my own ideal--which was, if I worked hard enough and did a really good job and was the best that I possibly be, then people would like me and I would be fine--was an illusion. . . . So I quit. It was awful. I felt numb. I couldn't believe it had happened.

Lydia's account is a depressing story of innuendo, intimidation and defeat, but happily it has a sequel. She left teaching, left the country, and then returned determined to teach again. After taking some science courses at a nearby college, she was able to reconstruct her resumé and landed a job at a high school in another town. There, she has built a new career as a capable and popular teacher. Rather than forcing her further into the closet, Lydia's experiences convinced her that her survival depended on being more open about her identity, rather than less, to the point where most of her students now know she is a lesbian.

Thinking back over her two teaching experiences, Lydia acknowledges that the differences between them are due most to the differences between the schools themselves: one, a small junior high school in a conservative, rural, fundamentalist community; the other, a mid-size high school in a coastal town whose large tourist population makes it relatively cosmopolitan. But she is convinced that her efforts to lie about her sexual identity at the junior high school made her more vulnerable there.

> I talked about my boyfriend in Boston and I had a picture of a friend of mine in my wallet. I had a copy on my desk. But I was nervous and I'm convinced that people pick up when you are nervous. They smell blood just like sharks. . . . It's a lot worse to lie, because they know that you are uncomfortable about something and they can't put their finger on just quite what it is. But they know that there is something. They would rather just know, I think.

Neither Lydia nor I believe that being more open about her sexual orientation would have prevented the attacks that cost her her job. But her assertion that hiding makes a gay teacher more vulnerable to attack suggests that for those confident enough to risk it, coming out of the closet may actually strengthen their position. Others expressed a similar perception.

> As a matter of my self-protection, it's simply easier to be semi-out than it is to be closeted. . . . It's the easiest way to be. (Jean)

> I got some excellent advice from a gay male friend who said, "You know, if you believe in your own integrity and you go in and do your job and you hold your head high, people will not have the courage to confront you." (Rose)

These comments lead me to believe that under the right circumstances, self-disclosure may be the ultimate survival strategy for a lesbian or gay teacher, and the only one that can lead beyond survival to real empowerment.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES: "I GUESS I'M SOMEBODY"

The idea of disclosure as a survival strategy is a provocative one. But it can best be considered as the final step in a process that begins with simple physical survival: keeping

one's job and avoiding harassment. At this level, gay teachers employ strategies appropriate for any teacher at risk of being labeled unconventional or "radical." They seek to establish their credibility by working harder than anyone else, they maintain a professional image, and they build networks of support among their colleagues.

> If there is anything I do to compensate it is that I work very hard. It never hurts. . . . I dress like a teacher. I wear jumpers, blouses and skirts . . . the basic teacher uniform. (Jean)

> They could try to fire me but I have been really careful to build my base of support with my parents and my staff. (Rose)

Along with establishing their image as professional educators, gay teachers must cope with the emotional strain of leading a double life. Often, birth families are unsympathetic, and so lesbian and gay teachers must turn to friends and partners, their "families of choice."

> I can tell you that if my Mom knew this stuff was happening with me now she would be out of her mind. She is very homophobic. (Rebecca)

> I was pretty estranged from my family at that point [after being fired]. I did not tell my mother, who still doesn't want to know that any of that happened. She still wants to believe . . . that my life is a lot easier than it is. (Lydia)

For some teachers, who had married and divorced before coming out, their children's rejection was part of the pain, but others found unexpected support from their sons or daughters.

> The first two years of this, my kids all went to live with their father and didn't have anything to do with me for a short period. My nuclear family, my birth family, all rejected me. (Rose)

> This treatment of her mother has galvanized Judy. She was ostracized. It is a very small area, so the kids in her school knew the kids in my school. . . . She graduated from junior high school this year. She was valedictorian, so she gave the "V" address. It was about discussing differences and she said the word "homosexual" four times. . . . It brought tears to my eyes. (Karen)

Some find support in their spiritual communities. Jean, who at the outset of the interview described herself as a "recovered" Catholic, mentioned that she had recently joined a Unitarian church because "they are very supportive to gays and lesbians." Peggy referred to her church life as one of the cornerstones of her personal support system, though she was frustrated by the need to hide her sexual orientation at church, as well as at school, because of her partner's wishes. Alan, whose life as Quaker is a central part of his identity, expressed the most integrated view of teaching, sexual orientation, and religion.

> I feel called to be a teacher. I feel called to be a Friend. And I feel called to be gay.

Most important in maintaining emotional support are networks of friends and colleagues with whom the gay teacher does not need to hide.

> My big job in the last year has been getting to the place where I now no longer move to any place in my life where there isn't someone who sees me whole. When I'm with my family, there's someone. When I'm in church, there's someone. She's the only one, but she's there. . . . At the university there are lots of people. (Peggy)

Rebecca described the support she had received from a lesbian discussion group she attends regularly.

> A lot of them are teachers. A professor from New Hampshire got [it] together. . . . We are both educators, we can support each other. Then you meet somebody else who is a biology teacher . . . then you meet somebody else who is a music teacher . . . and all of a sudden there are people. I remember the day that all of this happened--the cup and the calendar and going to our support group and telling them. You could have heard a pin drop in that room. Afterward to be so supportive and come up and give you a hug and say what a big step you are taking and that kind of stuff. Very supportive. (Rebecca)

Gay teachers also find emotional support from colleagues who share their view of the world. Karen's new principal became such an ally.

> This woman is bright, she's an RN, she's got guidance training. Her strong suit is working with people and children. . . . She is a real good ally. She thinks they are all lunatics, which they are. (Karen)

Finally, although the need to hide makes it very difficult for them to find one another, gay teachers within a single school can be each other's most significant support system.

> Q: You said there was one other gay teacher in the school. Are you friends with him?
> Dianne: Yes, he's not out at all to anybody.
> Q: Is he out to you?
> Dianne: Yes. I guess I'm somebody.

FROM SURVIVAL TO EMPOWERMENT

Protecting their jobs and their physical and emotional security consumes huge amounts of energy--energy that gay teachers might otherwise be free to invest in professional development or personal enrichment. Under such circumstances, the prospect of expending even more energy on coming out seems unthinkable. Nevertheless a few teachers have managed to begin this process. Aided by a combination of good judgment, courage and good luck, they have begun to emerge from the glass closet and have found that self-disclosure can be the strongest survival strategy of all.

> When you are behind those blinds, those shutters, you are hiding. You don't want anyone to see in and when they do, they can . . . control you. Once those [blinds] are open, now <u>you</u> can control that. (Rebecca)

> They know who they can jump and who they can't. . . . If this referendum [to defeat a gay rights ordinance] comes down I probably will at least selectively come out. [Author's note: the ordinance was upheld, 57%-43%.] I am tired of the closet. We can't afford politically to stay in the closet. We just can't. (Rose)

> Sometimes there have been things written on my blackboard like "DYKE," "LEZZIE." But it's not always negative. I have comics on my door, and there's one where on the margin somebody wrote just this past spring, "Cool Dyke." And in another handwriting is written, "Yeah." I'm sure they knew I would see that they like me. (Lydia)

Alan, who came out in a local newspaper interview while he was student teaching, found unexpected support from his colleagues and community.

> I told my allies, "I did this interview and I need you here for me, I am scared shitless." They got the paper and called me that night and said, "What

> a great interview!" I said, "Hold my hand tomorrow, because I am going to need it." I went to school and nobody said a word. This was amazing, good old Maine tradition, nobody said a word. The first grade teacher . . . she's a very taciturn person and she got very friendly, talkative. She said, "Did I tell you my son, a real estate agent, knows Miles?" [Alan's partner]. Morgan--she was in the first grade--her mother came up to me and said, "I'm going to save this interview until Morgan is old enough to read it. I want her to read it."
>
> Q: Did you get any negative things?
>
> Alan: No.

In several cases, when a homophobic incident made it likely that a teacher's sexual orientation would be disclosed to a principal or administrator, teachers were able to preempt the attack by taking the initiative. Rebecca received strong support when she went to her principal with the cup and the calendar; Rose, who became a potential target during a job squeeze, had similar success.

> I got a call from one of the the counselors [saying] that one of the social workers had said rather casually at a professional social work meeting in our district [that] Rose Collins was gay. . . . Both the social worker and the guidance counselor were pretty much out there on a limb in terms of the budget, and . . . maybe it was an attempt to solidify his job and not mine. I grabbed my boss and said, "Meet me at Burger King; I have to talk with you." She got there and said, "You don't have cancer, do you?" "No, but you have to know what was said at this meeting. I don't know if this person intends to say more or not, but it is accurate." She said, "Oh, I know, but that is none of his business." I lucked out again. (Rose)

RISK-TAKING: "I AM WHO I AM"

Listening to the stories of people like Lydia, Rebecca, Alan and Rose, it is tempting to imagine that if gay teachers could all be comfortable and matter of fact about their sexual orientation, the rest of the world would leave them alone and their positions in school would magically become secure. Such a fantasy ignores the deep roots of societal homophobia, the historical unwillingness of schools to deal with sexuality (straight or gay), and the personal price paid by educators who have been willing to take risks. Standing up to bullies does not automatically make them disappear, and no one but an individual teacher can know whether he or she is at a point in life where self-disclosure is appropriate or even

possible. But every teacher I interviewed, even the most closeted, found that though risk-taking made them more vulnerable, it was also empowering.

> Along with feeling like I'm not going to lose my job, and like they all know and its okay, has come this profound relief. I have more of a sense of humor. I have more energy. I come up with more neat stuff. . . . It's because I'm not having my energy drained off on a daily basis with terror. I joke around with the kids a lot. (Lydia)

Taking risks does not usually begin with an immediate threat of dismissal, as it did for Lydia and Karen, or with a blatant incident, as in Rebecca's case. More often, teachers initiate their own risk taking. Challenging homophobic language and behavior may be a first step.

> Classroom rule: no putdowns of any minority groups, [no use of] the word "nigger" and the word "dyke"--and I do enforce that--[and] "faggots." (Jean)

> At lunchtime I hear these things in the room. . . . I've got radar and I keep tabs on all the conversations and if I hear "fag" or something, it's like, "Tony?" Then I hear, "Sorry, Miss White!" . . . One thing that I do every day, that I teach without ever stopping to think about it, is that my kids know that in my room there are rules about how you treat other people. . . . I told them where the word "fag" comes from and their little jaws dropped. (Karen)

> Somebody will call someone else a queer and I always say we should use another word, that is inappropriate. Sometimes I'll say to a person, "What if that person is gay. How do you think it makes them feel?" (Dianne)

> A fairly close friend of ours . . . died the day before school started. . . . The day after I came back from the memorial service, one of the second graders started making AIDS jokes, "You've got AIDS!"--which was common. I took him aside and said, "I had a friend who just died of AIDS, and I came back from his memorial service, and I really don't like that joke. You need to think about the fact that there may be people here who have family or friends with AIDS, and it's not a funny joke. Do you know what AIDS is?" "No." He knew, but he wasn't going to say it. I said, "It's a disease that people get, and it's not just a gay thing." (Alan)

> The minister of my church read a book called <u>The Screaming Room</u> and just freaked out. It's a mother's journal . . . of her son's decline and death from AIDS. It's teachable, it's well enough written to teach. I read this book, and I just couldn't think about anything else for days. . . . So I started finding ways to weave it into other things we were doing. . . . And of course you can't deal with AIDS without getting into all the issues surrounding homophobia. You

have people making incredibly ignorant comments and you have to deal with them. So that was a door. (Peggy)

Teachers responded to homophobic remarks from their colleagues as well as their students.

> One of the worst comments ever made was by a fellow teacher, in the planning room. . . . He was explaining about how he and his family had gone . . . to Provincetown so they could go to the art galleries. My God, do you know what they saw down there? All of those exotic people, oh my word, there were women holding hands with women, men kissing other men. So he had to take his hands and put them over his children's eyes as they walked through the streets. I said to him, "Would you do that if there were Black people walking down the street, would you cover their eyes?" . . . That couldn't go by, that couldn't slip by. (Rebecca)

As my subjects talked about the risks they were beginning to take, it became clear that being interviewed was itself an act of self-disclosure. The question of how to name themselves prompted some interesting reflections on authenticity.

> Jean: I think I want to use my name.
> Q: First name? Last name?
> Jean. My total name, Total name. Let's do it. Total identity. . . . I am who I am.
> Q: It's up to you.
> Jean: That's that.

Dianne, who decided to use only her first name, expressed most poignantly the push-pull of the need for safety and the desire to be out. When I first asked her how she wanted to be identified, she said she would use her own first name. Later in the discussion, she said being referred to that way wouldn't feel safe. I suggested that we could change her name to a pseudonym, but she persisted with her original plan.

> Dianne: I wouldn't feel safe. There are things I don't feel safe about but I do them anyway.
> Q: I see what you mean. I can just use your first name.
> Dianne: Sure, that would be fine.
> Q: If you are comfortable with that, I don't have to use your last name or the name of your school.
> Dianne: My first name would be fine, as long as you spell it right: D-I-A-N-N-E.

THE GLASS CLOSET AND THE HALL OF MIRRORS

When I began talking to lesbian and gay teachers, I expected to find a few exceptional people who were out in their schools and a great many others who lived life in the closet. What I found instead was a process, a continually evolving dynamic in which teachers struggle to present themselves authentically while protecting their jobs, their physical safety and their emotional well being.

> It's like walking a fine line. Am I safe, am I not safe? . . . The "where is it safe?" question comes up all the time. (Dianne)

> Really it's not a secret, it's just limited discussion. I refer to it as like living in a glass closet. (Jean)

> I don't go around with an "L" on my chest or anything but I wouldn't say that I am really closeted. I have a hard time picturing how I am. (Linda)

Linda's comment shows how the need to hide and the simultaneous desire for authenticity can produce a cognitive dissonance, in which a teacher is never quite sure how he or she appears to the rest of the world. Caught in this double bind, teachers make fine distinctions among different kinds of hiding and different kinds of disclosure. For example, they distinguish between between answering questions with part of the truth and telling an outright lie.

> I get questions like, "Are you married?" Or, "You don't have any kids?". . . I say I have too many kids, I don't have time for my own. No, I'm not married." (Linda)

Some still use the "Monday morning pronoun" in the teachers' room or staff lounge; others consider silence more authentic than referring to their partner as a member of the opposite sex.

> When people talk about their weekends I [don't] make up stories, I just don't say anything. That's not good, but it's better. (Mike)

> I have always felt my life was divided because either people didn't know I was gay, or I couldn't talk about it. Like last spring, I thought, I am tired of

this, and put Sandy's picture on my desk. It's just stupid little things like that. (Rose)

The most difficult moral and logistic decisions come when a teacher is confronted with a direct question about his or her sexual orientation.

> Q: What do you think you would say if a kid did say, "Are you a lesbian?"
>
> Karen: I think I probably wouldn't say I am because I'm still unclear how much trouble that could cause in the community. . . . Sometimes I think I'll say, "I wouldn't ask you if you were heterosexual, so it's probably not appropriate for you to be asking me if I am a lesbian." I think that's probably what I would say. (Karen)

These contradictions were especially complicated for teachers like Karen and Lydia, who are relatively open and assume that many of their students already know they are gay. For them, the glass closet is also a hall of mirrors, where people pretend not to see what others know they see, and reflections turn into projections of everybody's fear and denial.

THE FUTURE: CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

Considering the oppression they face in their working lives, my subjects were surprisingly upbeat when they talked about the future. Most expressed qualified optimism; a few were even hopeful.

> I think that within 25 years it will be considerably safer. I don't think I'd use the word absolutely safe. I do feel fairly optimistic about it. . . . One of the things that gives me hope . . . is that I think kids are so much more enlightened than their parents and showing such heart and compassion for people and such real willingness to think about what it means to feel like somebody else. (Alan)

> Jean: The schools unfortunately are the last bastions of conservatism, the last places to change. . . . But in other areas of life things are changing.
>
> Q: Do you think it will be safe for teachers to be totally out in your working lifetime?
>
> Jean: My working lifetime?
>
> Q: Or your lifetime?
>
> Jean: Probably not. You never can tell.

Thoughts about the future led to reflections on their own role as change agents in schools.

> I kind of flip-flop. I'm leaning more towards, "Kids need good role models." Teachers can be those good role models, but then the fear comes out. (Dianne)

> One of the things I may end up doing is I might try to do some kind of speakers bureau thing, either myself or some other people going around to schools talking to kids about all these issues. . . . I'm going to play it by ear with my colleagues, and in an unthinkable world it could be that a couple of them will come up to me . . . and say, "Hey, you know what? I'm a lesbian." Who knows? (Mike)

Above all, gay teachers long to reach out to gay students, whose pain they well understand.

> I'm going to start a book table in my room. . . . on the shelf among the 15 or 20 books there's going to be <u>One Teenager in Ten</u> and <u>Reflections of a Rock Lobster</u>--about four books that have to do with gay/lesbian. And maybe if a kid . . . thinks that some gay person thinks it's all right to have it there, maybe that will help. (Mike)

> One thing I just do, I keep taking tiny little steps. This past week we were working on a program . . . on personal self discovery and self esteem issues. . . . I mentioned to the team that there is nowhere in here that mentions a kid questioning their sexual identity. And the fact that kids who perceive themselves as homosexual have a horrible time with self-esteem and identity and who they are and who they are going to be. (Dianne)

CONCLUSION: "I AM HERE"

Hearing these stories is both moving and infuriating. Homophobia is a sickness that blights the lives of thousands of American students and teachers, and the idea that gay teachers themselves should have to take responsibility for ending it is outrageous, to say the least. But there is a deeper meaning to these tales of "stupid little things" and "tiny baby steps." The teachers I interviewed, and others I have met, are beginning to see that risk-taking, disclosure, standing up for others, are essential for their their own self-worth. Every photo on the desk, every refusal to use the "Monday morning pronoun," every challenge of the slur overheard in the hallway, is a a way of saying, "I am here. I am lesbian or gay. I am a teacher. I am a whole person."

At the end of every interview, I share my own favorite scenario with my subjects. I tell them my fantasy that some morning at precisely 8:00 a.m., every lesbian and gay teacher in the country will simultaneously come out to their students and colleagues. My teacher friends and I love this image, for, as several of them said when they heard it, "What could they do? There'd be so many of us!" Though most gay and lesbian teachers are still living in the glass closet, they are walking through half-opened doors, one step at a time. It remains for teachers, parents, administrators and students who consider ourselves allies to match this courage by working actively to end homophobia in our schools. When that happens, the glass closet will dissolve, and we will see each other clearly for the first time.

Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Assocation, Atlanta, Georgia, 1993